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2. REPORT NUMBER: (b)(3):10 USC 424

3. TITLE: MILITARY,POLITICAL AFFAIRS-HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE SEEN AS MAJOR PROBLEM FACING ARGENTINE GOVERNMENT

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16. SUMMARY:

~~(C)~~ This IR forwards an Amembassy Memorandum of Conversation in which an Argentine magazine editor assesses the Argentine government's ability and willingness to resolve the human rights issue in Argentina. Source further discusses the Beagle Channel dispute and likely internal political reactions should the Papal mediation result unfavorably for Argentina.

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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

PARTICIPANTS: Dr. Carlos Floria, Lawyer, Editor of CRITERIO Magazine
Mr. William H. Hallman, Political Counselor,
American Embassy, Buenos Aires

DATE & PLACE: February 12, 1980, Buenos Aires

SUBJECT : Problems the Government Faces in Handling Human Rights Problems

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Floria said that for the first time he could remember the most unsettling problems faced by an Argentine government derive from international rather than internal concerns: Human rights and the Beagle Channel dispute. Always before deep concerns of a regime have come from within: the economy, social conditions, infighting in the military or the parties etc.

I asked how human rights could be relegated to the "international" category. Is there no recognition that this is a situation within Argentina that needs to be addressed?

Floria's answer was that the problem as presented to the government comes from abroad: The U.S. human rights report to the Congress, the United Nations debate in Geneva and the Inter-American Human Rights Commission report. Of these the IAHRC report was most potentially destabilizing. The United States report has been presented and publicized, without grave consequences to the regime. Whatever happens in Geneva at least will not be the result of something the government itself has done. But the IAHRC report will be interpreted as something the Videla regime brought upon itself, and the harder the report deals with the Argentine military institution the likelier it is that elements of the military will harbor and exploit the idea that Videla--and General Viola, his likely successor as president--brought this scourge deliberately or from ineptitude.

Any resolution of the Beagle dispute that can be construed to have shortchanged Argentina will also lead to harsh criticism of the regime. The regime will be accused--again by military hardliners--of having given way to mediation when a military solution would have resolved the issue in Argentina's favor.

"This year," Floria said, "will offer some very hard tests for the government." (Comment: Floria sees no practical, desirable alternative to the present regime and its plans for the future. His fear,

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as he went on to elaborate, is that "real fascist, anti-republican hardliners" would inherit the government if criticism over human rights policy and the Beagle were to succeed in unseating Videla.)

Was it impossible then, I asked, for the human rights issue ever to be ventilated here and discussed as a domestic issue?

Floria replied that this could come about only from the Army's own determination to root out its corrupt and abusive elements. Internal reform will never be undertaken if it appears the product of urging from abroad -- or from the civilian sector within Argentina, for that matter.

I asked whether there might be recognition within the Army now that a cleansing was in order. Floria professed to believe that there is: He said that he often hears this discussed by his military acquaintances. They raise the issue of My Lai and ways the United States army came to grips in Vietnam with abuses of power. The closer analogy which fascinates them however, Floria said, was that of the French in Algeria and earlier French military experiences. They analyze how the French military was scarred by the Dreyfus Affair, and how many French officers afterwards retreated into far right wing, even fascist causes and attitudes rather than respond to the humiliation an incensed French public sought to cause them. They speak admiringly of DeGaulle's curbing the OAS once he determined new policy toward Algeria, though it meant punishing some of his companions in arms.

Floria spoke of a letter written recently to CRITERIO by Emilio Mignone of the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights. Mignone had asked whether a letter from him could be published and Floria had replied affirmatively--provided that the letter was reasoned and balanced. (Comment: CRITERIO's style is deliberately gray and non-polemical--to the point that this reader, sometimes finishes reading scrupulously fair minded articles wondering whether there was any outweighing opinion at all.)

The Mignone letter provoked three calls from Army officers, Floria said, two of them generals, who said that Mignone's charges regarding abuse and corruption should be investigated.

Could any amount of investigating by the Army deal out justice to service people who had abused human rights? Floria said that Argentina was in no shape to look for justice, and could only seek the understanding of competing elements and their willingness to forget the past. There is no deal to be made, he said, with the "Firmeniches," but something must be worked out among the families of the disappeared, the military forces and other elements of society affected by "the war." What Argentina will need, Floria said, is a "Pact of Moncloa."

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And the chances of this? Floria said he believes almost all of the political sector would agree to drawing a veil over Argentina's harrowing recent history--"just as the slayers of nuns and the slayers of government soldiers in Spain agreed at last to salute the same flag." Unfortunately, he said, the country has not had 40 years to forget nor was the entire population worn to exhaustion by the "dirty war" and its consequences.

I asked whether it had not been "pressure from abroad" which had forced the regime to clean up its act and sharply reduce abuses. To the extent this was the case does not this indicate a continued tough policy by the U.S. and the Western Europeans?

Floria said that "turning the screw" had been a factor, but that screw turners had better be aware that at some point the nut breaks and the machine falls apart. This brought us back to where we started: challenges from abroad on the human rights (as well as Beagle fronts) which could destabilize the Videla regime, perhaps to the point of its collapse.

(Comment: Floria is a man to be heard. He is definitely a member of the "establishment," and unlikely to present antipathetic views--however urgent and necessary. At the same time however he is not an axe-grinder or a partisan of anything other than some kind of sane, reasonable solution to Argentina's problems. "Always before--for thirty years--we've needed to address the problem of how we can be effectively governed. Now we have an even more urgent problem: How we can reestablish civility and confidence." His liberal Catholic bi-weekly has considerable influence.

Perhaps his optimism that the Army can root out some of its evil--or even wants to--is unfounded. Analogies with DeGaulle and France are pitted with Argentine dissimilarities. His assessment that only the Army can muster the will and power to cleanse itself is, nevertheless, compelling.)

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